

**VERRIER ELWIN AS
REMEMBERED BY HIS
FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

A birth centenary tribute



Editors

**B. Francis Kulirani
Bibhash Dhar**

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FOREWORD

August 29th 2002 marked the birth centenary of Dr. Verrier Elwin. His life was one of continuous journey and comprised many phases. Verrier Elwin came to India as Missionary seeking reparation for the 'sins' of Englishmen in India. He endeared himself to Gandhiji, Nehru and Sardar Patel with his commitment to serve the weaker sections of India's masses. His interaction with them and many others influenced him to work for the welfare of the tribes of India.

During the early part, Elwin worked among the tribes of central India and the last decade of his life was spent in the north-east India. Dr. Elwin had the chance to observe tribal life from very close quarters. With an academic background in English literature and a creative mind he wrote vividly on the way of life of the Indian tribes with an uncanny vision of anthropological details and emic perspectives. His concern to safeguard the Indian tribes from adverse effect of their uncontrolled interaction with the outside world, is well known.


Dr. Elwin was associated with the Anthropological Survey of India for a brief period in the capacity of Deputy Director. The editors, Dr. B. Francis Kuli rani and Dr. Bibhash Dhar deserve compliments for bringing out the present publication entitled *Verrier Elwin as remembered by his family and friends* as a tribute to Dr. Elwin on the occasion of his birth centenary. The reminiscences of Elwin's family members unfold some still unknown qualities of this great admirer of the cultures of Indian tribes.

I hope, the readers would find this volume useful.

J. K. Sarkar
Director-In-Charge

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A brief portrait

Verrier Elwin, Baptised as Harry Verrier Holman Elwin was born in 1902 at Dover, Kent in England. He was the eldest of the three children. His sister Eldyth was two years and brother Basil was 5 years, younger. His father, Edmund Harry Elwin was an Anglican Bishop and held the see of Sierra Leone, the nation on the west coast of Africa but he died at the early age of 38 of yellow fever, only a few weeks before returning to England from Sierra Leone to take over as Bishop of Bristol. Verrier Elwin barely remembered his father because



As a teenager

Edmund Harry Elwin mostly used to remain on tour in Africa. Verrier was only seven years old when his father died. The void left by his father's death was only filled up by the passionate devotion towards the children by his mother. Elwins thus grew up amidst financial constraints but the things perhaps would have been different had Verrier Elwin's father lived and gone to Bristol. In this context Elwin (1964:2) observed, "had my father lived and we had gone to Bristol to the beautiful Cathedral Close to live in dignity and with financial security". Elwin's boyhood days were devoid of comforts. He with his brother and sisters used to help his mother in all



Adapted to Indian life

the domestic work. Such was the atmosphere in which Verrier



With Meerabain at Sabarmati

Elwin grew up but his home was the place of intense affection and in this context Elwin (1964:17) has rightly observed, “my home was a place of intense affection. Mother was a darling and looked after us wonderfully.”

Verrier joined Oxford in the autumn of 1921. After finishing his English course Elwin decided to devote two more years to do Theology Finals due to his interest in the subject. Immediately after completing his Theology Final, Verrier Elwin was appointed vice-principal of Wycliffe Hall. Soon there was a chance for him to visit Palestine and spend a couple of months studying the Bible but then Elwin resigned from his job at Wycliffe Hall. However, in the mean time he had purchased a house in North Oxford. During his later years in Oxford a desire grew in Elwin to make reparation to poor. Subsequently, Elwin thought that he should go to India as an act of reparation to serve the people of India instead of ruling them. Elwin’s interest in India was doubled, when he was teaching in North Oxford and met Sadhu Sundar Singh. In the same period Elwin also met the German theologian professor Heiler when he visited the university. Elwin held interesting discussions with Professor Heiler about the mysticism of East and West. He also wrote a book on the *Sadhus*. Later, Elwin met father Jack Winslow who had been a missionary in western India and founded an *Ashram* settlement known as *Christa Seva Sangh*. Thus, Elwin thought that he would travel to India as a monk but his mother disliked the idea of her son becoming a monk but at the same time she never objected to Elwin’s plan to go abroad. During this period

M.K.Gandhi visited England and impressed by his new political philosophy, Elwin became more determined to go to India and serve the poor and needy. Finally, Elwin boarded a French passenger boat leaving Genoa for Colombo. He arrived at Colombo on the November 30 th, 1927 and after spending a few days over there he landed in Malabar



With Gandhiji at Sabarmati

coast in early December. He was totally impressed by the scenic beauty of the country, its cleanliness and children. Elwin thus got the taste of almost different hemisphere. After a few years and with his regular contact with Gandhiji, Verrier Elwin developed a great love for India, left the church and subsequently became an Indian citizen. Elwin (1964:preface) has rightly mentioned, “ My contact with Gandhi wedded me to India and I am today an Indian citizen. Although I loved and still love great and ancient cities, I have lived by choice in remote and primitive villages. I have married into tribal society and found felicity there.”

Excerpts from the nostalgic memories of Smt. Lila Elwin

Once while Verrier Elwin was driving through the streets of Ahmedabad with the great leaders like Sardar Vallabh Patel and Seth Jamnalal Bajaj, Elwin heard for the first time the word 'Gond', soon there was a request by none other than Seth Jamnalal Bajaj to Elwin to go to the Central Provinces, the erstwhile nomenclature of Madhya Pradesh, and do something for the tribe (Gond) who were almost entirely neglected



*Marriage rites according to Maria
Gond custom*

by both national workers and missionaries. The idea struck Verrier Elwin's mind and immediately he wrote to his friend Shamrao Hivale. It may be mentioned here that Shamrao Hivale was six months younger to Dr. Elwin but he became a close friend because Shamrao Hivale was associated with the Poona *Ashram* and guided Dr. Elwin into the Indian ways, took care

when Elwin fell ill and looked after him in times of need. However, by then Shamrao Hivale was in Mirfield in England when he admitted himself in a Theological Seminary of the Anglo Catholic persuasion. Thus, joining Elwin and executing his plans as advised by Jamnalal Bajaj meant Shamrao cutting his training in England. But, Shamrao on receipt of the advice from Gandhiji finally sent a cable to Dr. Elwin mentioning that he would join Dr. Elwin by the end of the year. However, the 28th of January 1932, was a turning point in Dr. Elwin's life as he and Shamrao started out on a bullock cart with only two hundred rupees through the jungles amidst the Maikal jungle from Betul for Karanjia, a Gond village in the Mandla district

of Central Province. Village Karanjia was recommended for setting up of their headquarters by the Bishop of Nagpur known as Bishop Wood. However, just before starting for the Central Provinces Dr. Elwin met a few great personalities like Thakkar Bapa, Acharya Kripalini and Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan.

In Karanjia, Dr. Elwin and Shamrao were joined by Kusum, Shamrao's wife and they organised themselves into a small society under the banner of *Gond Seva Mandal*. However, in 1949 the society was renamed as the Tribal Welfare and Research Unit (TWARU). The hut, which was constructed to house the society looked like an *Ashram* and it was built and decorated in Gond style and the Gond visitors felt perfectly at home whenever they visited the *Ashram* as there was a school and a hospital. The head office of the TWARU was later shifted to Sanhrwachhapar and they stayed for four years and then moved to their final location at Patangarh also in the Mandla district. Smt. Lila Elwin still remembers very clearly that in 1949 she saw the Englishman (Dr. Elwin) of whom she heard from her friends in Sanhrwachhapar, in her own village at Patangarh. At Patangarh the Englishman opened a dispensary, a school, a shop, a guesthouse and a leprosy cure home. But these facilities were not constructed in a day but were built in a slow pace, as the Englishman was not having enough finance for the purpose. Dr. Elwin got all the institutions constructed under the banner of TWARU. Smt. Elwin still remembers that the primary school at Patangarh was a bit away from the leprosy cure home. Dr. Elwin used to receive some money to run the institute at Patangarh from his friends in Bombay. Smt. Elwin further remembers that there were five teachers in Dr. Elwin's school at Patangarh and all of them from outside the Mandla District. One of them was from Allahabad. A few destitute children were also there in the school. Smt. Elwin has only

vague memories of that period as she was a girl of only 12 to 13 years of age. There was a leprosy cure home where about 5 to 6 tribal families who were inmates. Smt. Elwin used to go to the dispensary with her friends out of curiosity to see for herself what the foreigner used to do. She remembers that there was one person who seemed to be very close to Dr. Elwin and it was none other than Shamrao Hivale. Shamrao was very popular with the local people who were mostly Pardhans. Incidentally, Smt Elwin also belongs to the Pardhan community. The dispensary used to remain crowded by patients suffering from innumerable diseases like pneumonia, measles, jaundice and leprosy patients were already there, but a good number of them even suffered from syphilis.

Dr. Elwin's sister Eldyth also stayed at Patangarh for a few months. Everybody loved her and her little house used to remain crowded throughout the day. Evenings at Patangarh were something to remember when the villagers used to sit around little fire along with Shamrao, Dr.Elwin and Eldyth. Shamrao used to crack jokes and the villagers enjoyed.

Later Dr. Elwin married a beautiful Gond girl and her name was Kosi. Her village was near the village Karanjia. She used to accompany Dr.Elwin on most of his tours. A baby boy was born to them whom Dr. Elwin named Jawaharlal. This name was partly after the Gond king Jawahar Singh of Sarangarh and partly after Jawaharlal Nehru, as the boy grew up and was later known as Kumar. Tragically, this marriage of Dr. Elwin did not last long as after some years he got a divorce. Smt. Lila Elwin used to stay at Patangarh with her mother, two younger brothers and two elder sisters. Her father expired when Smt. Elwin was a mere child. However, in 1952-53 Ms Lila got married to Dr. Elwin and the registration was done at Jabalpore court. Afterwards, following all the traditional

Pardhan customs the marriage was solemnised. In 1953 Smt. Lila Elwin went out on tour twice with Dr. Elwin, once to the Santhal areas in Bihar and to Jagdalpur in the Bastar district, at present in the state of Chhattisgarh. She still remembers the roaring water of Chitrakoot falls on the river Indrawati near Jagdalpur. In the same year Dr. Elwin along with his family moved to Jabalpure and stayed there for a considerable period. Their two sons Wasant and Nakul were born here. Subsequently, Dr. Elwin arranged to keep his family at Mahabaleshwar and he alone proceeded to Shillong in 1953. Afterwards in 1954 Dr. Elwin sent Shri. Sundarlal, a friend of his to bring Smt. Lila and two of their sons from Mahabaleshwar. Soon Smt. Lila Elwin and her children were brought to Kolkata and they stayed as guests of Dr. B.S. Guha for a few days. Then Mr. Victor Sasun another friend of Dr. Elwin arranged air tickets for Smt. Elwin and two sons for Guwahati. It was in 1954, Smt. Elwin still remembers that, Nakul was on her lap on board the flight and one co-passenger, an Assamese gentleman offered to make Wasant comfortable on his lap. Smt. Elwin felt uncomfortable on the flight because in those days Indian Airlines Corporation used to operate the Dakotas, which were uncomfortable. Moreover, for Smt. Elwin,



Nongthymmai residence, Shillong

it was her maiden air travel. The family was received by Dr. Elwin at Guwahati airport and brought to Shillong. Those days Dr. Elwin used to stay in a big house located at Nongthymmai. Smt. Elwin still remembers that her husband used to do all the official work from the house (residence) at Nongthymmai and only during the official meetings and discussions Dr. Elwin used to go to the Midlands near St. Edmunds School, Shillong.

In 1957 Smt. Lila Elwin visited Arunachal Pradesh then known as NEFA (North East Frontier Agency) with Dr. Elwin. They left behind Wasant, Nakul and the youngest son Ashok who was then only two and half years old. Smt. Elwin left the sons at Shillong because she was confident on the maid who was from her village at Patangarh who loved and cared for the children and the children were also fond of her. Elwins thus left Shillong for Bomdila and Tawang. They went up to Charduar near Balipara on jeep and then they undertook foot march to Bomdila via Chako. It may be recalled that there were no road to Bomdila or Tawang in those days. Thus the Elwins were accompanied by the political interpreter who was responsible for the safety and security of Elwins and a number of ALC (Ancillary Labour Corp) members carrying the loads and luggages on their backs. Smt. Elwin's maternal uncle also was there as a team member. So far Smt. Elwin remembers, after undertaking foot march for about 2 to 3 hours the team used to take rest for a while and used to have tea, coffee and snacks. At last the party reached Bomdila and stayed with Major (Retd) R.S.Nag, Indian Frontier Administrative Service (IFAS) who was the Political Officer at Bomdila. After a few days the party again started for Tawang on foot and in most of the places the Monpas constructed welcome gates and offered them butter tea and expressed their joy. So far Smt. Elwin's memory goes, the Elwins were offered to sit on the Ponies on the way to Sela



Pleasant memories

pass, which is 14 thousand feet above the mean sea level and remains under the perennial snow cover. But Smt. Elwin found it uncomfortable and preferred to walk up to Sela. She still remembers the people of Tawang who came up to Sela pass to welcome and receive them in the traditional Monpa gesture and offered *Khadas*, the traditional Tibetan/Monpa scarf of as a mark of respect, and served tea and snacks. After a few more days of walk the Elwins reached Tawang and stayed with the Circle Officer of Tawang.

Importantly, Smt. Elwin still remembers how bad she felt due to certain incident that took place during their tour to Bomdila and Tawang. It so happened that while they were at Tawang, a wireless signal was sent from Shillong that their youngest son Ashok who was a mere baby was seriously ill. Ashok was suffering from worms and some of the worms came



Jawaharlal Nehru visiting Nongthymmai residence

officials knew about it. Elwin thus did not prolong their stay at Tawang and started back for Bomdila on way to Shillong.

On reaching Bomdila they again stayed with Major Nag and were busy attending the invitations for lunch and dinner. Everybody knew that Smt. Elwin was fond of mushrooms.

One of their friends invited the Elwins and Nags to have supper and mushrooms were offered much to the delight of Smt. Elwin. But alas! Perhaps the mushroom was not of good quality and



Holding discussion with Nehru

Smt. Elwin felt uncomfortable and the same was the case with the daughter of Major Nag. The problem was that the very next morning the Elwins were scheduled to start their foot

out through his nose and mouth. Thus, he was immediately hospitalised at Shillong. Dr. Elwin however kept the wireless signal a secret and never divulged it to Smt. Elwin because he knew how restless a young mother could be, but all other

march for Charduar on way to Shillong. The foot march started as per schedule but Smt. Elwin could walk for only sometime and then she fell unconscious. She regained consciousness only by 12.00 O'clock that night at Rupa, which is 16 Kms below Bomdila. Smt. Elwin was told afterwards that the ALCs carried her on an indigenously made stretcher and the doctor at Rupa who by a good chance possessed the required medicine and saved her. Next morning the wife of the Forest Officer of Rupa came to see Smt. Elwin and told her that she received information that Ashok is out of danger. Immediately Smt. Elwin reacted with exclamation and shock and demanded to know when was Ashok taken ill and why it was not divulged to her. Smt. Elwin felt bad more because everybody around her knew about the whole incident except her and that too she being the mother. Whole tour lasted 45 days.

Mrs. Elwin also vividly remembers that in their house at



In meditation

Nongthymmai they had hosted many dignitaries including the Prime Minister of Independent India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. The members of the IFAS and their families also frequented their

house. In the later part of his life Elwin was busy finalising his books.

Dr. Verrier Elwin, as Remembered by his son Wasant

We were all very young, when our father passed away in 1964 after he suffered a major third heart attack at Delhi, miles away from his family. My mother did not want him to leave for Delhi but some pressing work awaited him there and he had assured that he would be away for a day or two.

I had always been close to him and his death upset me tremendously. While he was away at Delhi I was on a "hunting" trip with some officers of the Assam Rifles at Garam Pani, which is in the Assam-Meghalaya border today, then of



Mrs Elwin receiving Sahitya Academy Award posthumously

course, we were all part of Greater Assam. A messenger arrived from Shillong to take me back home. I remember the messenger telling me, that my' father was very ill, but I somehow did not believe, the night before I was very troubled, logically, I cannot explain this. So, I insisted on the 'truth' and refused to budge, unless he told me what I somehow already knew.

With the passage of time things have become vague and hazy. But at the expense of sounding clichéd, he was indeed a towering individual and I believe anyone who came in touch with him even if once, can ever forget the encounter. His charismatic personality endeared him to one and all, from the august visitors who called on us, to the ordinary *mali* and *khansama* who served him.

He was more remembered as “*Bara Bhaiya*” rather than as ‘*Bara Sahib*’. He was a gentleman in the true Baconian sense, kind and considerate at all times. He never imposed moral imperatives on any one. Thus people, though awed by his presence, were never overwhelmed.

Nongthymmai, the village we lived in was very different from what it is now. Even the skyline has changed but this is true of the rest of Shillong as well. We had motley of friends, school chums, local boys and even Assam Rifles jawans (who were on guard duty). I suspect they were wondering what he really was about or what made him click with his java cigars and long hair. Hippies were yet to surface!

The house we lived in was called ‘Sridham’ a sprawling place with huge grounds, which included an orchard, a large garden and a private driveway to the main bungalow. Our mother’s plum jam was a favourite with us and our close friends, who were lucky used to receive seasonally a jar or two. We were surrounded by a horde of people who lived within the compound and helped around the house. There were several of them who were from my mother’s village of Patangarh. Some of them were, my mother’s kin and had been with my parents from the ‘Central India’ days. Hari and Bhajan *Mama* were the principal ones who guarded their fiefdom zealously! They accompanied him on all his tours into the interiors of NEFA. Unfortunately, they are no more. The driver, his wife and children, the *mali* and his lot, made up the colony of which my father was undoubtedly the patriarch.

My parents had to host many parties, which enabled us to meet all sorts of people, family friends, scholars, politicians, officials and even VIP like the then Home Minister, Vallabh Patel. Of course, our most celebrated guest was Prime Minister Nehru. They were from the same genre and shared a special rapport.

Nehru's visit evoked a lot of excitement in the whole locality, and the security arrangements thrilled us, the children.

A lot of people visited the museum and library at our home; many among them were budding anthropologists. These included foreigners as well. They would spend hours going through these rare artifacts collected over a period of time by him. One such visitor was a foreigner, with his family and Land Rover, who were travelling round the world. They became our guest. Otto painted a portrait of our father, which was later to adorn the cover of '*The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*'.

Aunt Eldyth, younger sister of my father, visited us several times from England and though she might have been sceptical about his religious leanings simply adored and admired him. When she came to Shillong, after my father's death, I felt, that she felt, it was her moral duty to guide us gently towards Christianity.

As far as religion was concerned, our father gave us the option to decide on our own. Thus we were not initiated into any particular religious stream. No Sunday School for us. Our home was the abode of several religious outlooks, principally, Hinduism from my mother's side, Christianity from our aunts,



Wasant, Ashok, Nakul

a staunch Anglican and of course Buddhism. Thus under such democratic religious ambience, Nakul declared he was a Pagan. Ashok chose the Buddha's middle path, whereas Hinduism, which has a strong presence in our household due to my mother and definitely because of Hari and Bhajan Mama who had their rooms adorned with poster sized pictures of Hindu deities from Ram, Hanuman to Vishnu and Shiva, influenced me.

Christmas saw a huge decorated tree, stuffed goose and a Christmas pudding, all the way from England. The bounty of Father Christmas lay wrapped under the festooned tree. Diwali witnessed dias and sweets and of course fireworks. Holi was a splash of vivid colours. Many a times now, I think we were the chosen one.

The Chinese aggression in 1962, I feel was a great blow to him, because like Nehru he felt like a betrayed pacifist. The total chaos everywhere in the northeast with people becoming panicky and running away to safer havens upset him greatly.

He went on extensive tours and on many of these our mother accompanied him. On such occasions we were left behind in Shillong, impatiently awaiting their return. I too, was fortunate enough to tour with him a couple of times. I cannot exactly remember which particular regions I went to with him. But I remember the various villages amongst the Adi's, the Mishmis and the Apatanis. Many a times we had to travel by elephants and in some places we were literally carried by makeshift palanquins. He was always welcomed with great fanfare. In one village, several feasts were prepared for him, as there were several dignitaries in that single village. So he dined in each place, that very evening. The meals prepared were fit for a king and ample enough to feed the entire village. *Apong*, their local drink was always the first in the menu.

Many holidays were also planned but with his busy

schedule many of these outings had to be called off. He realized our disappointment but these were made up for, by going to the cinema which the whole family enjoyed and to elaborate dinners at one of the many Chinese eating places in existence then (before the Chinese aggression when many innocent Chinamen were put into jails, all over the country). Once we joined our parents on a visit to Aizawl and Lungleh in Mizoram – then Mizo Hills. It was a strenuous but exciting outing. A trip to Calcutta, though slightly hazy was exciting because, the huge house we stayed in, had endless spiral stairways.

But to me, one of my most remarkable and unforgettable holidays was when we all went to Delhi and stayed with the Ratees, good family friends. It was during winter and we were all wrapped in thick woollen clothes. The special treat was that we were all going to witness the Republic Day Parade, and it was here that I got separated from the family, the crowd being mammoth. I did not realize it then, but the panic I must have generated was unbelievable. Everyone was frantic and must have thought the worst. Ashok did not realize his contribution towards the already tense scenario, when he innocently declared, that he had seen me walk away with some strange looking women. They were convinced now, that I had been kidnapped, and would probably have a limb or two cut off and put in the streets of Delhi as a ‘beggar boy’. I know my parents were devastated. But my young brothers who were so much younger than probably wondered what all the fuss were about.

An astrologer was consulted, and he with the greatest of confidence declared I would be found within seven hours and so it was. My mother, after I was found, was convinced in the strange but being ways of the gods, but my father though relieved, must have wondered.

After he suffered his two heart attacks in Shillong many

restrictions were imposed upon him and giving up his cigars was felt most by him. His illness restricted visitors and only friends were allowed occasionally. During this stage he was mostly confined to his room, which was in fact his pray-cum-study room, adorned with *tankhas* and statues of Buddha. These were difficult days for my mother.

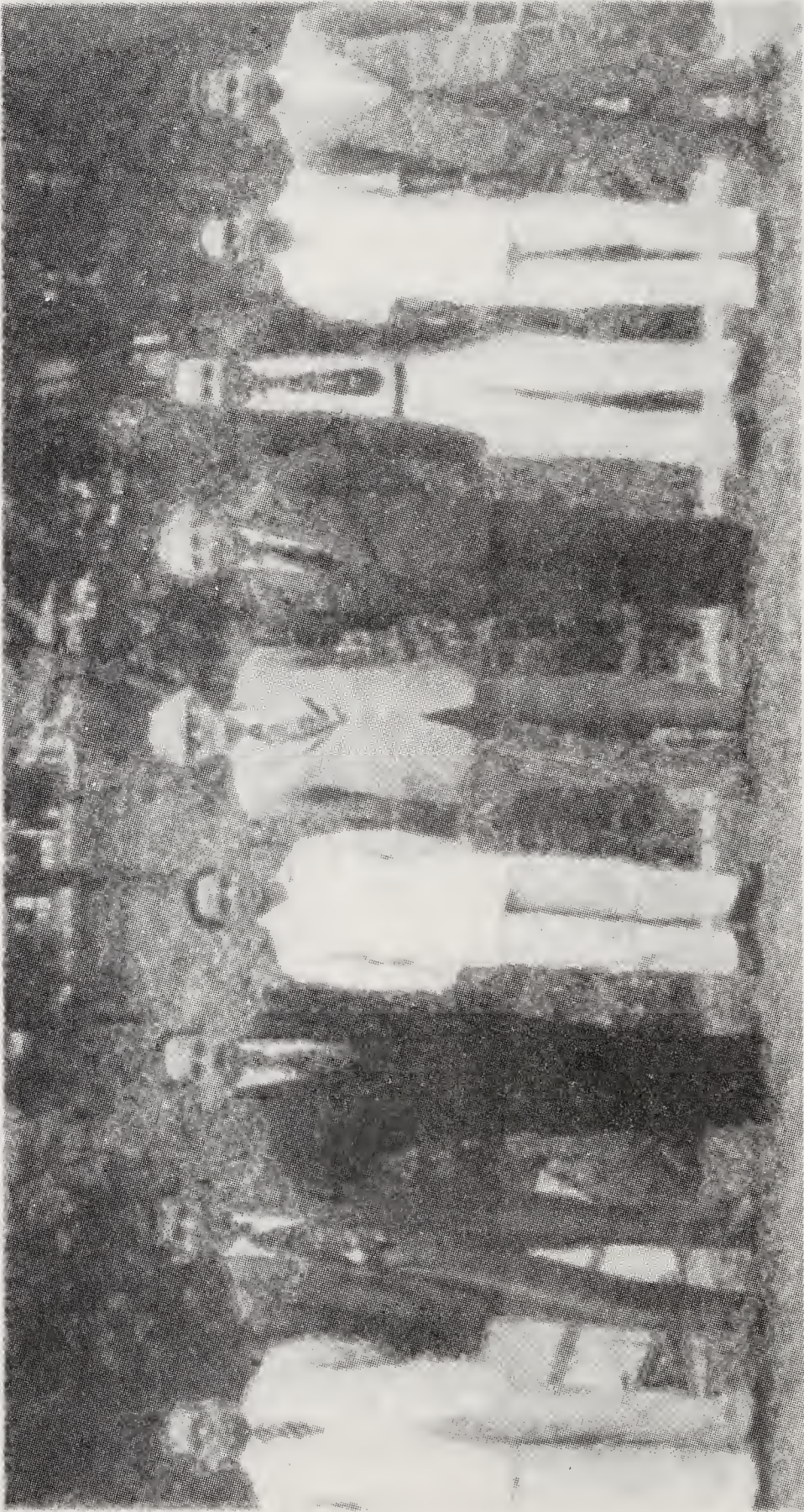
His last heart attack took his life, and his remains were brought back to Shillong in a special plane, chartered for this purpose. It was in his special room, where the body was laid, before the cremation, which was carried out in the Buddhist tradition. His ashes were later immersed in the powerful rivers of NEFA.

Many decades have since passed, but his memories are still there, in a special place in the hearts of all those who were fortunate enough to have met him in person.

He will be remembered for the remarkable contribution he made towards a section of people, who were ignored and simultaneously exploited by the people of the mainstream of the country. He was trying to preserve a cultural heritage which he felt was slowly but surely becoming extinct specially at the rate 'civilization' was catching up, globally. He never meant to put the tribal people and their exquisite art into a zoo, where people could observe them, as we do animals behind bars; as many of his critics may have supposed. He was simply aware of the vulnerability of these simple folks.



Mrs Lila Elwin and sons (2002)



Elwin and members of the Arunachal Research Team with Prof. Haimendorf (4th from right)

Verrier Elwin as remembered by a member of Indian Frontier Administrative Service (IFAS)

Murkot Ramunny

Verrier was our friend, philosopher and guide. We could have asked for no better 'father figure' who could advise us, as we started on our long journey of spreading administration and introducing development in an area, which was more or less left as a vacuum by the British administration.

It was in 1953 that Prime Minister Nehru, after receiving the report of the Border Commission, decided to spread the administration up to the international border and develop the people and the area along the new policy lines laid down by Nehru himself. Nehru had taken two unusual policy decisions, regarding tribal development. One was to invite volunteers from all civil, Police, Armed Forces and Universities, with special attitude and aptitude to serve difficult areas, mainly tribal people, and secondly to appoint an outstanding anthropologist to advise the newly appointed administrators of north eastern tribal areas.

Thousands had volunteered. Finally twenty five officers senior and junior were selected. Nehru met the selected officers and introduced them to the tribal world, and independent India's policy towards the tribal people. He also announced that we would have a distinguished Anthropologist as our Advisor. That was Dr. Verrier Elwin.

All the selected officers from different walks of life moved to Shillong by the end of 1953. All were put up in the famous Pine wood hotel.

In the lounge we met as long lost friends. A hefty huge Englishman, with longish hair that almost touched his shoulders, with deep eyes with a mischievous twinkle behind thick glasses, and a huge cigar in his mouth, strolled towards us with a broad smile. But our attention was not towards this huge person. All eyes turned to a petite, dark, slim, short lady, with a disarming smile on her face.

The huge Englishman, saw our eyes turned towards the lady and not him, quickly introduced himself as "I am Verrier, and this is my wife Lila". From that moment struck a friendship that was to last long. In the next two hours at the bar and dining table, the couple made us feel that we were one family. For the next two decades and more we lived and worked as a family in which Verrier Elwin was the central figure.

The cold morning in Shillong would have kept us in the warm bed room under thick blankets. But that was not to be. We were all to report to the Governor Shri Jairamdas Doulatram at ten in the morning, along with the wives who had accompanied some of us.

The Governor dressed immaculately in white *khaddar* long coat and *dhoti*, wearing a Gandhi cap, had Verrier Elwin and wife by his side. He met each one of us in the Raj Bhavan library.

There after for two weeks, we were like children in a primary school. The class room was the library. The Head Master was the Governor, who sat through most of the classes. Lectures on various topics of administration were given by experts. But Verrier was the ruling deity, who laid down the programme and conducted the classes.

Verrier Elwin's lectures were most interesting. A man of literature, anthropology was an amateur anthropologist. Verrier was sent to tribal areas by Mahatma Gandhi. As far as

anthropology was concerned he received 'sermons in stones, and books in the running brooks'.

The wives also attended these 'Classes': They later participated in all our work, tours, and shared our problems. Lila gave a most unpretending lead to all the other ladies.

The Governor noticed one day that a couple of officers were absent. Next day when they appeared, he said "You missed some interesting talks. The officer in that corner is taking copious notes, he could share it with you. That was me, composing dirty rhymes! There was one particularly about Verrier. I couldn't read it out but I showed it later to Verrier who had a sense of humour. It was easy to make rhymes about him, as his name rhymed with terrier.

The Governor desired a hills and plains festival, at the Raj Bhavan. Verrier got all the officers to join in the organisation of dances, songs and dinners. This was the first practical lesson for all of us. It was the laboratory where we directly learnt about the tribal people, their way of life ably interpreted by Verrier Elwin. At the farewell dinner, when hundreds of tribal men, women and children squatted on the floor on mats, the Governor too sat on a mat along with them. It was a practical demonstration of what Nehru had indicated in his speech in Delhi. Verrier Elwin pointed it out to us. "When the people who come to see you have to squat on the floor you will also sit on the floor". Nehru had said. That was symbol of equality, which was the basic life style of the tribal people.

Verrier had his residence cum office cum museum and library in Shillong. He had also a linguistic department under him with some specialists. They took up the study of tribal language in general, some tribal language which had no written script and hence no text books for children. It was a wonderful job, a challenging one, the results of which are seen today.

Nehru said that Elwin's writings had a great influence on his tribal policy. At the same time Elwin used to state that his tribal policy was based on Nehru's ideas. Whatever it was, they were complimentary to each other. It was after a few years direct experience with tribal people of north-east, that Verrier Elwin produced the 'Philosophy for NEFA' to which Nehru wrote the foreword. In it were five points, later known as Nehru's Tribal Panchasheel and became the basis for tribal development. It is a pity that the basic policies of tribal administration, namely sending specially selected volunteers after being given training to tribal areas, and the Tribal Panchasheel have not been followed in other states of India. The results could be seen in the sufferings of tribal people in many of our states.

All of us who had the privilege of serving the tribal people of North-East had the advantage of touring the interior villages with Verrier. His deep insight into the mind of the people, without knowing their language was a revelation. All of this comes through the love of human beings, whoever they are and whatever they are. It was a practical manifestation of the ancient Adwaita philosophy.

In all his elaborate tour notes Elwin painted a picture of the people. His brush was the finest English literature. He laid the foundations for the development of the tribal people of north-east India. His book, the philosophy for NEFA, was a policy directive at that time. Times have changed. So have the tribal people. Policies had to be amended. The only question is, are we doing it scientifically and with sympathy to the people.

Nehru and Elwin were criticised for continuing the Inner Line policy and not allowing outsiders to settle in the border areas of NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh). The inner line was a British innovation, for different reasons, not to allow outsiders

beyond a point. Seeing what is happening in many states of India, it is apparent that the people of north-east have been lucky not to find themselves landless due to the onslaught of exploiters, money lenders and land grabbers. The innerline regulation saved them. Tribal people of many other states like Kerala have lost all their lands. Verrier has been found fault for suggesting tribal parks to isolate and protect them during the British days. They were hey days for exploiters, and Verrier's intention was to save the tribal people.

Verrier was a person of simple habits and meagre requirements. He liked his evening peg, and the big cigars. Books were his food, yes food for thought. He had dedicated his whole life for serving the tribal people. From Gandhiji's *ashram* he walked into the jungles of the pure and innocent tribal people. He got his great opportunity after independence. He was picked up by Nehru who was equally fond of the tribal people like Gandhiji, Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Thakkar Bapa.

There is an old adage that 'Behind every great man there is a woman'. Lila was one of 'the purest ray serene', which 'the dark unfathomed' jungles of India produced. She made the home a happy one, for all of us. Verrier was free to carry on his work, tours, lectures and writing. Lila managed the house and the children and the innumerable visitors including VIP's.

Verrier Elwin blazed a trail of service to the neglected humanity, the tribal people with understanding, sympathy, dedication and commitment and above all with a sense of humour. The twenty first century needs such heavenly souls.

May his soul rest in peace.

Reflections on Elwin by a Linguist

I. M. Simon

I first met Dr. Elwin after my appointment as Assistant Philologist, in the Philological Section of the Research Department of the then North-Eastern Frontier Agency (or NEFA). Dr. Elwin's concern for the tribal people of India who were then, as indeed most of them still are, among the most exploited communities in this country, immediately caught the attention of a group of dedicated friends of the Tribes in India, including Mr. Gandhi and Mr. Nehru. He had done significant work among the tribes of western and central India and had seen with his eyes how deprived most of those tribes really were.

The British had struggled to control the 'Unadministered Areas' outside the control of the Government of Assam. With Independence, the Government of India adopted a new and novel policy of tribal administration, a step that was seen as most necessary following a violent and bloody encounter involving unsuspecting officials of the Government of Assam's own 'Frontier Service', escorted by an Assam Rifles column, and tribes that were determined to preserve their own independent existence within their own forest domains.

In these desperate circumstances, the Government of India through the Ministry of External Affairs decided to assume full responsibility for the administration of the hill tribes and to this end set up a new Service, the Indian Frontier Administrative Service (IFAS), a select body of meticulously selected officers who could be expected to establish peaceful

relations with the hitherto isolated tribal communities, assumed direct responsibility for the administration of what used to be known as the Frontier Tracks. Later, for administrative convenience these frontier tracts would be known as NEFA & NHTA (or the Naga Hill & Tuensang Area).

Dr. Elwin's association with the north-east started at this very same time, facilitated by his sharing the same views with the Prime Minister, Mr Nehru, as to what form the administration should take in regard to tribal communities which had never come into contact with the outside world. Both agreed that, in Mr Nehru's words, tribal communities should be allowed to develop according to their particular genius.

In the wake of the Chinese attacks in 1962 both these great men would come under ruthless attacks from people who would appear to have allowed their prejudices to cloud their judgment, and as it turned out, people who attacked Dr. Elwin's views of the ideal tribal policy as expressed in detail in his very readable book *Philosophy For NEFA*, without having read this or any of his other books, or more specifically, without bothering to know his mind. A very determined attempt was made by powerful lobbies in Delhi to blame the débacle in NEFA on what was suggested as Dr. Elwin's undue influence on the Government of India and to overturn the tribal policies that had been adopted since British days, and to *immediately* speed up the assimilation of the tribes, and for the country, the idea died a natural death, primarily, because there were few ex-service men who would deliberately sacrifice the comparative comfort and certainty of life in their own homes for the uncertainties of a new life in practically a new environment. Fortunately, too, the Government of India refused to be panicked and went about doing what it intended to do from

the start. Adoption of a new policy would, in fact, have alienated the tribal people completely and created a situation that could have brought upon the country new conditions that some senior officers believed would have been worse than even the ongoing troubles in other tribal areas of the north-east. It would have been a matter of satisfaction to Dr Elwin that his 'policy' has remained in place even long after his death.

In fact, there are many observers who believe that almost exceptionally among the tribal communities of the north-east, those of Arunachal Pradesh have a more national outlook and see no problem in considering themselves as much Indian as any community from Kanyakumari to the Himalayan foothills and from Gujarat to Assam. Significantly, Arunachal has been spared the traumatic experiences that have befallen other parts of the north-east in recent years. This will be my own appreciation of the role of Dr. Elwin in the unfolding of events in north east India, which I believe, was an influence for good.

As a very junior officer in the Research Department I could see that he exerted a powerful influence upon the quality of work that the Department generally achieved. Some of my colleagues in the field, the District Research Officers, used to tell us how insistent Dr Elwin was in his demand that they should take infinite care in drafting the monographs on the various tribes as assigned to them. It was not uncommon for them to be asked to revise, and revise, their drafts up to six times sometimes, before he would approve them for publication. As the monographs would be made more informative by the inclusion of photographs, Dr Elwin was instrumental in setting up the Photography Cell and the Art Cell within the erstwhile Publication Section, which initially was a very important segment of the Research Department.

Dr. Elwin also took advantage of his contacts with

authorities in the field of Anthropology, by inviting scholars like Dr Haimendorff to Dr B.S. Guha with whom the research officers would be able to interact. The gain has been that of Cultural Anthropology.

It was my lasting regret that I could not have the advantage of a long association with him because within two years of my joining the Department he had passed away. I can, however, acknowledge that even within that short period, what I saw as his style of functioning was a lesson that impressed itself powerfully upon my mind, and for this I shall always be beholden to this great man.

Reminiscence of an Adi associate

Oshong Ering

Dr. Verrier Elwin was, indeed, a towering personality and also a man of great literary of our time. I feel very small to write on his literary genius, vision and achievements. However, on his 100th Birth Anniversary, I extend my gratitude to him. I admire at his untiring effort to guide the tribes of India, particularly the tribes of the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA. presently Arunachal Pradesh) to the limelight of modern life with love and care.

I have made an attempt here to communicate my experiences while I was associated with Dr. Verrier Elwin for some years. I will feel happy if my experiences serve some food for your thought.

I was the first Matriculate from NEFA secondary school, Pasighat. In the first part of 1955, I came down to Shillong and joined collegiate education in St. Edmund's College. Within few days, a messenger came and handed over a small chit written by Dr. Verrier Elwin to me. It read "Mr. Oshong Ering may please come to my place for sometime". His official designation was "Advisor on tribal affairs". Without loosing time, I walked towards his residence in Upper Nongthymmai. The messenger led me. A sizeable building stood amidst natural environment. The messenger led me through the front door. I was thinking all the time how I would talk to an European. He would talk to me in English language. But hardly I could speak in English. We were educated in Assamese medium. English was a subject in our school. With some amount of hesitation, I reached the last corner of a hall. A man found sitting and typing in a corner. Seeing me he stood up and walked towards me. Broad faced

with long hair Dr. Elwin extended his hand and asked are you Mr. Oshong Ering? Shyfully I replied 'yes'. A big size of 'Virginia tobacco' cigarette was found hanging in between his lips. He shook my hand warmly. I noticed that two of his fingers looked brown because of burning of his cigar. He asked me to be seated. He enquired about my difficulties and how I felt in the college. He used simple English and short sentence which I could understand. Probably Mrs. Indira Miri, the then Education Officer, NEFA, might have briefed him about me. I exchanged few words with him in broken English shy fully. He then led me and showed me his heaps of books and collection of specimens for museum. Some two or three books written by him on the Bhils, Santhals, Oraons etc, were handed over to me saying that I could read them. But I found them difficult to be understood. To my discredit, till today, I seldom read his books. Simply I read the real man, but not his books. He asked me to meet him once in a week at least preferably in afternoon of every Saturday. On that day he did not put much of queries. I drew my satisfaction in talking in English with a European.

Thereafter I used to visit him once in a week. In course of time, frequency of meeting and discussion increased. He raised volumes of queries many of which I could hardly understand. He tried his best to make his queries lucid to make things understandable to me. He enquired about myths, legends, stories, songs, dances, art, culture, customs, usages, rural council, social service, hunting, fishing, social etiquette, agriculture, natural environment and so and so forth. What I knew, I told him and he noted them. Probably, he was collecting data for his books. Out of all these discussions, some subjects that he raised struck my mind. They can be placed under the following categories:

- a. Development of the tribes on modern footing.
- b. Preservation and development of traditional culture of the tribes.
- c. Promotion of tribal dialects and publication of literature.
- d. Conversion of tribals to religious 'isms' and
- e. Encouragement of traditional rural self-administration.

a) Tribal Development on Modern Footing

As reflected through our discussion, Dr. Verrier Elwin was very much concerned about the changes in the society of the tribes. Sounding deep and philosophic he uttered that the wave of change had already come and knocking at the door. Implementation of Community Project and spread of literary education were responsible for the change. Centuries of slumber and isolation had ended. In the twilight of material civilization, a vista of outlook opened up. When the daylight advances, the eyes of the tribes might be dazzled by brighter light of the day leading to confusion. The colonial Government did not prepare the ground for the change of life. It posed a challenging problem for Dr. Verrier Elwin and how to deal with it at such delicate juncture of life was his concern.

While discussing about the problem, he sometime almost forgot whether his young friend could understand him or not. Whether understood or not, I used to nod my head. Dr. Elwin was not against change of tribal society and thereby did not deprive the tribals of the benefits of change and development. It was clear that some people mis-read him. He advised me to reap the benefit of modern ideology in such a manner that we stand up with full stature with dignity and respect. He wanted us to develop on the line of traditional genius.

b) Preservation and Development of traditional culture

I still remember, Dr. Verrier Elwin attached very much importance on traditional culture. Whenever, we met, he dragged me to discuss about tradition and culture. He asked me about *Aabang* (traditional narration) myth. I told him about *Nibo-Robo* (struggle for survival and supremacy), *Bingyat Aabang* (fertility of land and production of food crops), *Limir Libom* (creation/origination of *Mithun*) and so on. Besides, we discussed about *Donyi-polo*, gods, goddesses, spirits, human soul etc. with attention, he used to hear me and jotted down things of his interest. One day, he questioned me to let him know of Sun God and Moon God-*Donyi-polo*. Somebody might have given him a distorted picture of *Donyi-polo*. I told him that *Donyi-polo* stands form truthfulness of purity or enlightenment or peacefulness. The Sun and the Moon are the physical symbols of Adi faith. So, *Donyi* and *Polo* are not god or goddess. He appreciated me.

Dr. Elwin repeatedly advised me to preserve traditional culture. Further he said that preservation alone would not serve the purpose. Simple preservation means stagnation. Our tradition and culture should be exposed to modern world in such a manner that it does not erase its pristine colour and values. He desired that tribal dialects should be given a written form and traditional oral literature be preserved by compiling them. He told me that *Aabang* were treasure house and valuable jewels will be discovered in the treasure. He wanted me to help him in preserving oral literature, especially *Aabang*, so that he could leave behind them to posterity. If not now, but posterity would appreciate us in future. He expressed his fear that world was moving forward fast and in the process tribal culture

was fading away to his pain. Some amount of protection was needed. He was in favour of maintaining the Inner Line Regulation for the purpose. But the same time did not favour 'isolation' and exhibition of keeping tribes as almost 'museum specimen'. He was serious about preservation of tribal traditional culture and to develop it with dedication. This would help the tribes in maintaining their identity. Therefore, maintenance of traditional culture and development drew his attention most. He told me, what would happen if traditional cultural ethos of the tribe fades away in the light of modern materialistic life. The succeeding generations would discover and feel that something was lost. Revival would be difficult. The feeling that 'something is lost' would haunt human mind. How a frustrated mind reacts, nobody can predict ahead.

c) Promotion of Dialects and Literature

Probably, on the advice of Dr. Verrier Elwin, a tribal dialect cell was established in NEFA Administration. It was known as Text Book Production Branch, placed under the Education Department. Mrs. Indira Miri, who was the then Education Officer, requested me to translate some of the textbook lessons from English to Adi dialect. I attempted to translate them in Roman or English script. Late Mukti Nath Bordoloi and Lakhsya Kumar, Assistant Education Officers (AEO) guided me. We produced some textbooks. Within few days, Nehru in his policy statement announced that all the tribal dialects of NEFA be written in Dev Nagri Naye Talim script. All became stunt. All our effort was wasted and thrown into wastebasket. What is Dev Nagri Naye Talim script? Fortunately Mrs. Indira Miri, the E.O. and self happened to acquaint with Naye Talim script at Wardha in 1951. It was a simplified form of Hindi script.

So, under the guidance of Lakshya Kumar, AEO, we translated text books. Some textbooks were published and they were introduced in Adi populated areas. It opened up a Pandoras Box of criticism. I withdrew from the venture and met Dr. Verrier Elwin for advice. The translated version of Dev Nagri Naye Talim script was not easily readable. Not only that, use of diacritical marks to denote some peculiar phonetical sound shrouded words and sentences. Things looked shabby. Dr. Verrier Elwin told me that since it was a policy matter, he could hardly advise me on it. Simply he wanted that whether in English or Hindi he wanted to give a written form to tribal dialects. I argued with him. I pointed out that on his advice, NEFA Administration was going to write text books in innumerable dialects. Many of the dialects were spoken by few hundreds of people. Publication of text books for such minor tribes might not find readers. I pleaded the text books should be published in some major tribal dialects first. There was no proper understanding. Ultimately, the venture collapsed and since then no proper initiative has been taken. So, Dr. Elwin's dream of bringing out of literature in NEFA tribal dialect remained unfulfilled.

d) Religious Conversion of Tribals

The British colonial Government patronised Christian Missionaries working in North-East Frontier areas. Those missionaries converted, the Mizos, Nagas, Garos, Khasis etc to Christianity. Their idea was that tribals had no religious faith, cultivated a satanic culture and when converted to Christianity, they were treated pious and at par with people belonging to advanced communities. In the process, the Khasis, Mizos, Nagas, Garos and other tribes of India lost their traditions and became artificial/superficial

‘civilized’ people. Dr. Verrier Elwin, though a Christian, disfavoured the practice of such conversion as ‘contemptuous’ and ‘ridiculous’. He told me that Christians were handicapped with ‘superiority’ complexities. Some amount of hatred and wrong thinking had accompanied the Christian Missionaries at that time. He said that damage had been caused already. ‘Reparation’ becomes a difficult task. Teaching of Christ and practice of conversion had been distorted. ‘Conversion’ without ‘conviction’ is a wrong exercise, he said. Indeed Dr. Verrier Elwin did not like the idea of conversion of tribes into any religious ‘ism’. By converting tribes to Christianity, a great damage has been caused to traditional culture.

e) Rural self-Administration

Dr. Verrier Elwin used to ask me about *Kebang* system in Adi society. Probably the functioning of *Kebang* institution of the Adis impressed him. The *Kebang* is a socio-politico and cultural institution of Adi society. It is a result of age-old traditional practice. It stands on a three tier constitutional structure. The lowest unit is called the *Dolung Kebang* (village council). The second tier is the *Banggo-Bokang Kebang* or the council of the tribe. In these institutions, the Adis discuss, debate and try to find out solution of disputes and problems of the village. Normally, they arrive at consensus conclusions. Dr. Elwin must have noticed of the *Kebang* sitting in villages while touring in for flung areas of Adi inhabited regions. He commended- ‘the Adis were tremendous debaters and speakers in their forums’. Every village was an autonomous unit of their traditional organisation. They practised socialistic democracy in conducting day-to-day affairs of the village. He put many queries on functioning of the *Kebang* to me

and thereby put me in difficult situations. Neither I could understand his searching queries properly, nor he understood my broken English. He expressed his desire to popularise *Kebang* system throughout NEFA, and in fact, because of his influence *Kebang* became a common word in NEFA during his time. He advised me to carry the message of *Kebang* to various tribes of NEFA.

He was also found seized with a query raised by some anthropologists and sociologists. It was a thought-provoking question. Tribes were marching towards the main stream of Indian society. In such a face whether they would be able to retain their distinct identity in pristine forms, because Indian identity would be their identity. They would merge with greater community of India. If that were so, tribal identity would have to give to national identity. If at all to die, die early painlessly. Why die-hard? To this query, he said that it was a common knowledge that one day a person would die a physical death. But knowing fully well, an individual do not like to die early. He struggles to live further. The psychological force of 'will to live' plays a great role. Struggle to live a long life is the eternal desire of man. If this is so, he asserted that we should not draw a pessimistic view on social life. So we should struggle hard to establish our existence and identity. Our tradition, custom, heritage and aspiration should find a place in the civilised society; otherwise, the classic image, melodious songs, dancing poses and rhythmic steps would be buried in oblivion. Time would come that we repent for our negligence. Frustration would haunt our mind. Posterity would blame us. Where then we stand? Voices and classic images of the tribes would be reduced to subject matters of anthropological and sociological studies in the succeeding generations. Therefore, Dr. Verrier Elwin advocated for vigorous attempt to revitalize and develop

social and cultural traditions of tribal society so that succeeding generations do not feel the suffocation of modern life. Subsequently, sometime in 1961-62 an official copy of Dr. Verrier Elwin's 'Philosophy for NEFA' reached me. Subjects that we discussed about, found place in his philosophy. Probably, he was collecting his data for his book then. My association with him was a worth-learning experience. Apart from my textbook lessons, I learned many things from his queries and discussions. His searching queries are ringing in my sub-conscious mind even today. To me, Dr. Verrier Elwin himself was an institution of knowledge and learning. On his 100th Birth Anniversary 100th times I salute to him. I remain indebted to him forever. I have attempted to give scrappy accounts of experiences with Dr. Verrier Elwin to you. I will feel happy if my conveyance helped you to analyse Dr. Verrier Elwin's ideological vision.

